

Professional Book Review

Schultz, Brian D. (2008). *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press. 173 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-4857-2 (pbk). \$19.95

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In the current educational landscape of the United States, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the curricula and teaching practices used in urban schools. Both teachers and students are under heavy scrutiny as they strive to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores under the federal legislation of No Child Left Behind. Carl A. Grant, who wrote the foreword to *Spectacular Things Happen*, uses the following questions to challenge educators and pre-service teachers to grapple with their own beliefs and assumptions regarding their instructional practices and curriculum decisions within the urban school setting: What is the best way to educate all students? In what ways are teachers being prepared to teach in urban schools? Can teachers successfully teach students of color? Will students of color reject the “acting White mantra” and do what it takes to be successful in school? (pp. IX-X)

In *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, author Brian Schultz has written a narrative of his year-long journey teaching fifth grade at Carr Community Academy. As he is about to embark on his journey, he honestly asks himself Grant’s questions and then sets out courageously to find the answers. Throughout the five-chapter narrative, the author reflects on his classroom practice as well as the educational growth of his students. Schultz honestly and openly shares with the reader his questions, doubts, and triumphs while working with the students in Room 405.

At the time when Schultz taught at Carr Community Academy, it was located in Chicago’s Cabrini Green neighborhood. Schultz notes that “according to most media accounts, [Cabrini Green] is one of the most notorious and infamous housing projects in the United States” (p. 4). Because of the challenging conditions of poverty, drug abuse, and gangs associated with Cabrini Green, Schultz found it imperative that he understand how the students from his neighborhood learn and what they consider worth knowing. He wanted to keep his students motivated and engaged in their learning, while teaching them the necessary skills needed to progress in school.

Being new to the teaching profession, Schultz described the conflict that he was experiencing between the preexisting societal norms in education and his own teaching philosophy. He explained that in the current educational system, schools revolve around standards, accountability, and measurement. As a teacher, he was “expected to teach to standardized achievement assessments and deliver scripted, content-based lesson plans” (p. 14). Although Schultz wanted his students to meet or exceed the state standards, he clearly felt that these instructional practices and “canned materials” were

not effective in reaching his students. Schultz believed that authentic learning in which students solved an actual problem could successfully meet the state standards.

While wrestling with the conflicting ideologies, there came a turning point in his career. Schultz attended a workshop on Project Citizen, a program that promotes citizenship in the schools and was designed to involve fifth through eighth grade students in public policy. Students identify a problem in their school or community and are given opportunities within the classroom to solve the problem. Schultz believed that providing opportunities for students living in urban areas to solve actual problems that were meaningful to them allowed these students “to create a love for their learning that might endure the travesties and injustices they faced both in and out of the classroom” (p. 4).

Students in Room 405 were given the opportunity to brainstorm the problems that were affecting them. They chose to focus on the numerous problems within their school as well as to tackle the issue of a promised new school for their community that had never materialized. Through their class project, the students were given the opportunity and responsibility to co-create a “meaningful curriculum that crossed disciplinary boundaries and integrated subjects” (p. 25). Schultz used the project as a catalyst to develop a democratic classroom which valued the students’ strengths, needs, and ideas. The class project became the center of the entire curriculum for the rest of the school year. The opportunity to participate in authentic learning was the spark that ignited the imagination, interest, and creativity of the students in Room 405. The students were motivated, and the results of their year-long project had far reaching effects across the nation.

Schultz concludes his narrative with an update about the students’ progress. Due to their innovative and unprecedented efforts in creating a unique and creative curriculum not found in most classrooms, the students were asked to present their curriculum at the Center for Civic Education’s (CCE) National Conference the following year. They were the only school-aged group selected from classrooms nationwide. This conference was only the beginning. Since then, Schultz and his former students have presented at several conferences, spoken in numerous college classrooms, and keynoted seminars. They recently presented a session at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

In the chapter entitled “Justice-Oriented Teaching,” Schultz suggests how interested educators may begin to plan for authentic learning within their classrooms. Schultz notes that “teachers who teach against the norms and allow their classroom curricula to become integrated and based on the students’ priority concerns may unwittingly put themselves in the line of fire” (p. 127). Schultz suggests that teachers interested in creating this kind of a classroom gain the support of the administration, colleagues, parents, and the community. In addition, Schultz recommends that educators look to the extensive literature to support their classroom practices. For Schultz, the literature provided courage, ideas, and justification to teach in a progressive way. He suggests reading works written by John Dewey, L. Thomas Hopkins, and many other authors found on pages 134-140.

Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way is a well-written and poignant narrative. It is not merely another inspirational story to be read and filed away. On the contrary, it chronicles the gradual transformation of a teacher and his students as they create a democratic classroom in which learning is exchanged through “dialogue, deliberation, and debate” (p. 139). Throughout the book, Schultz challenges the assumption that students from disadvantaged communities are not capable of or are not interested in transforming their education. The students in Room 405 began a quest in which they participated in political and democratic activities as they sought to bring about change in their community. Through the process, they emerged as active civic participants who were able to transfer their acquired skills into the real world.

As a practitioner with more than twenty years of experience in the classroom, I highly recommend this book as a springboard for discussion among educators and pre-service teachers. Schultz acknowledges that “with the high-stakes accountability at the forefront in schools today, many teachers and administrators believe democratic classrooms to be impossible” (p. 139). Schultz believes that educators need to continue the discussion of what it truly means to educate our students, especially students attending inner-city schools. *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* will challenge and encourage educators to begin their own journey of implementing democratic teaching into their classrooms, one step at a time.